

Theological Theses concerning the relationship of good works to eternal life.  
Part one in which the view of the Reformed church is expounded.

1. The doctors of the Roman school are accustomed to attribute to the doctors of the Reformed church that they teach that the good works of the faithful have no relationship to salvation and eternal life, whether as merits or causes or even as conditions or some other similar thing. So it seems with Bellarmine in his work *On Justification*, book 4 chapter 7. “Our adversaries,” he says, “agree on this, that good works are not necessary to salvation, except by a necessity of presence. The meaning of this view is that good works ought to be done because otherwise faith would be neither a living nor true faith unless good fruits were performed, just as a fire is not a fire unless it burns.

Nevertheless, good works do not have any relation to salvation, as merits, causes, conditions, etc. In this, they say faith ought to be distinguished from works, because faith has a relation to salvation, because it apprehends salvation, and therefore faith is said to be necessary to salvation, but works have absolutely no relation [to salvation], and therefore are indeed necessary, but not to salvation.”

2. But those who write against Bellarmine protest that at this point he has either not sufficiently understood or not honestly explained the Protestant doctrine, as, e.g., Pareus says in the cited book: “It is false,” he says, “that we teach that works are necessary only by a necessity of presence; and that good works have absolutely no relation to salvation, not even as conditions—this, I maintain, is false. For even if they have no causal relation, nevertheless they have, or are able to have, a relation of succession [*relatio ordinis*], as a means to

an end, antecedent to consequent, a necessary condition [*sine qua non*] to an effect, the presence of that condition cannot indeed effect [salvation], but its absence is able to impede salvation. For example, fighting is necessary for victory, and victory is necessary for a crown, but fighting does not effect by itself victory (for both sides fight!), nor does victory effect by itself a crown (for it is graciously given, according to a promise). Yet, the absence of a fight is able to impede both a victory and a crown.”

3. Similarly, Ames in *Bellarminus Enervatus*, Book 6 Ch. 6, says this to the same words of Bellarmine: “We do not deny that good works have any relation to salvation: For they have the relation of an adjunct which follows and is an effect of the salvation that has [already] been obtained. And it is [also] an antecedent adjunct, fit for obtaining salvation. And they even have the relation of a confirming argument for our confidence and hope of salvation. But we deny the possibility that any of our works are a mediatorial cause of justification and salvation.”

4. But in order that the doctrine of the Reformed school might be better known and, if possible, every opening for some accusation about what follows might be closed off, we have thought it very important to explain a little more distinctly and extensively what the Reformed think about the relation of good works to salvation according to the doctrine of Scripture.

5. Firstly, then, it is certain that good works are a condition without which celestial glory is not able to be obtained, and without which one can in no way avoid eternal destruction. For “without holiness, no one will see the Lord.”

And, “Unless,” Christ says, “your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the heavenly kingdom.” Similarly, “every tree which does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

6. Nor are good works simply some condition which is supposed in those who ought to gain eternal life. Instead, they are the way which leads to it, and the means ordained by God whereby one is led certainly and efficaciously to eternal blessedness. For, as the Apostle says in Rom. 2: “tribulation and distress for every soul who does evil: but glory, honor, and peace for those who do good. And for those who by patience in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, God will give eternal life; but for those who are contentious, and who do not assent to the truth, but believe unrighteousness, there will be wrath and anger.” To this point also pertains that passage of the same Apostle in Romans 8: “If you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if, by the Spirit, you put to death the flesh, you will live.” Whence it is that the Scripture says that through good works are calling and election is made certain, and our entry into the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ is given to us. “Be diligent,” Peter says, “that you make your calling and election sure through good works. For in doing these things, you will never go wrong. For so an entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ will be richly given to you.” And what James says in the first chapter of his epistle makes the same point: “The one who looks into the perfect law of liberty, and remains in it, being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of works, this person will be blessed in his doing.”

7. And this is the reason why the faithful, zealous for good works, are said to work out their salvation, Phil 2: “with fear and trembling,” Paul says, “you shall work out your salvation.” For that reason, Paul, writing to the Corinthians as well, attributes to those afflictions which the faithful patiently suffer for Christ, that these afflictions work eternal glory in us: “and our light tribulation, which is of the present moment, works in us beyond measure a sublime and eternal weight of glory, not contemplating the things which are seen, but those which are unseen.” 2 Cor. 4.

8. For although the good works of the faithful do not properly or on their own effect their eternal salvation and glory, yet rightly they are said to bring it about because they are the means aiming and leading to it, and which, from God’s ordination and promise, eternal life and glory necessarily and infallibly follow. Therefore, although the theologians of the Reformed schools rightly deny that good works are properly called causes of salvation, given that they do not immediately and on their own attain the effect of salvation itself, nevertheless, in a wider and less proper sense, they are able to be called efficient causes of salvation, namely insofar as everything which, by whatever means, works and concurs to some effect is called an efficient cause, as John Davenant explains the Protestant view in his *De Justitia Habituali et Actuali*, ch. 32: “Bellarmine’s affirmation, when laying out his opinion, that good works are necessary to salvation on the ground of efficacy, is true, if he takes efficiency broadly, for all that which in any way operates and concurs to the effect of salvation; it is false, if he understands such an efficacy as either implies merit, which is to be derived from the righteousness of Christ alone; or such as is apprehensive, which pertains to the power of faith alone; or such as is properly

efficient, that is, capable of itself to effect salvation; in which sense God alone is the efficient cause of our salvation.” And afterwards, “We do not deny efficacy altogether to good works in relation to salvation, but meritorious efficacy, or efficacy properly so understood: namely, such as reaches or produces the effect itself of salvation: but efficacy taken in a broad sense, that is to say, as working something preceding the effect of salvation, we willingly grant to spring from good works.”

9. But in order that we might be better able to conceive of the relation between good works and eternal life, it is fitting to consider the various similitudes which Sacred Scripture uses to explain it. First, for instance, Scripture compares good works to the act of sowing and eternal life to reaping, or to produce which is thence harvested. Paul says, “For that which a person sows, this he also reaps. For, the one who sows to the flesh will reap from the flesh corruption. But the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit (Gal. 6). This is similar to what is written in Psalm 126: “They who sow in tears will reap in exultation.” And Psalm 58: “Certainly there is a reward for the righteous.” Since just as he who puts seed into the ground, with time established by God and nature, harvests fitting fruit from it, so they who are zealous for piety and righteousness do not work in vain, but patiently await the fulfillment of the divine promise sometime afterward, whence, at last in the life to come, the crop of glory and the greatest happiness sprouts to them.

10. Additionally, eternal life is frequently compared to a reward and crown, but good works are compared to running or a fight. So, Paul writing to Timothy says, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished my run, I have

kept the faith. Therefore, there is a crown of righteousness laid up for me, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will return to me on that day.” And in his first Epistle to the Corinthians: “Do you not know that those who run in a race all indeed run, but only one receives the prize? So, run in order that you may obtain it. And every person who competes in a contest keeps himself from all other things. And they do that in order to receive a corruptible crown, but we fight for an incorruptible one.” In other words, just as the person who competes in a contest is not crowned unless he has genuinely fought, so also no person ought to promise to himself blessed and immortal life from God unless he fights against his own lusts and makes his flesh obedient to God. And moreover, just as certain prizes had been established by those who had instituted the games for the men who were conquering others in a contest or in the gymnasium, so also life and eternal glory is the prize, according to God’s law and promise, which certainly awaits all those who seriously and sincerely exercise themselves in good works.

11. But Scripture especially speaks of good works as a certain duty and work imposed by God; it speaks of eternal life and glory as a reward promised by God, and which will be compensated by God for that work. So, Christ addressing those who suffer persecution on account of righteousness says, “rejoice and exalt because your reward is great in heaven” (Matt. 5). And the Psalmist considers that reward when he says that in the keeping of the divine judgements there is great reward (Ps. 19). And Solomon also in Proverbs says, “to the one who sows righteousness is a sure reward.” Therefore, Paul writing to the Corinthians says every person will receive his own reward according to his own labor (1 Cor. 3).

12. Again, when holy Scripture calls eternal life a reward for good works, it uses the word “reward” not strictly or properly; but in a looser sense, and somewhat improperly—insofar as it signifies everything whatsoever which, according to an agreement [pactum], is recompensed for some work or labor. In order to understand this, it must be observed that for something to be properly called a “reward,” two things are always required. First, that there be a proportion between work and reward—and not any proportion whatsoever, but some equal proportion. Then, that the reward is an obligation for the labor by strict justice and from justice, properly understood. But neither of these is true in the case of good works and eternal life.

13. For as pertains to the first point [i.e., the need for equal proportion], life and eternal glory is so large and so great a reward that it far exceeds the price and the moral value of our good works, if they are judged on their own merits. For that good is in every respect perfect. But our good works are produced with many defects: they are not exact with regard to the strictness and precision of the divine law. If those works which are most excellent among the good works of the faithful are looked at and seem to be most outstanding, none will be able to surpass the sufferings endured by Christ out of love for God. And yet the Apostle speaking about these says, in Ch. 8 of Rom., “I think that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to future glory, which will be revealed in us.” Similar to these is what we recently cited from the same Apostle, For our light affliction which is for the present moment works in us an exceeding eternal weight of glory (2 Cor. 4).

14. And certainly, Christ sufficiently notes in Luke 6 that God attributes to our good works, which arise from love for him, a much larger and plentiful value than they are able to have on their own. Christ says that he returns to his own not only a good measure, but a superabundant one. “Give,” he says, “and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken, and superabundant will be placed into your laps.” By which words, Jesus exaggerates the extent of the divine remuneration above that which we are able to offer.

15. So although there is not an equivalent proportion or equality of price and value between the good works of the faithful and heavenly life and immortality, which God rewards to them, nevertheless as is clear from what already has been said, there is a multitudinous relationship, and a certain harmonious proportion, so to speak, among the two; in which way we can say the same about a seed and a crop; between seed and the fruit which arises from it; between a contest and a crown, which is awarded to the victor—these similitudes Scripture uses for this purpose. Similarly, between a means and an end; between a road and a destination to which that road leads; between a moral good, that is, virtue and holiness, and a physical good, that is, felicity and blessedness, answering to it from the opposite side; between the beginning of a thing and its consummation; or between a thing begun and that same thing finished. Finally, between things of the same rank, and which spring from the same principle, and have a certain natural connection among themselves. For good works pertain to grace which is glory begun, given that, on the other hand, glory itself is consummated grace. Hence good works have the logic of a moral good but eternal life has the logic of a physical good (as I



might say). And indeed, both are part of the supernatural order and have the same author, the Holy Spirit.

16. Hence it is that Scripture says that God will render to each person, whether good or bad, according to his works, that is, just as it harmonizes or is consistent with their works. And indeed, it is fitting and altogether suitable to divine wisdom as it is well with those who do well and bad with those who do bad. And those who live well and laudably in this age—and above that which the mode of nature brings—will live well and blessedly in the coming age, also above the mode of nature.

17. Therefore, even those who live piously and justly in this world and suffer for Christ are proclaimed worthy of life and heavenly glory in holy Scripture. As in Revelation 3:4: “They will walk with me in white [clothing] because they are worthy.” And 2 Thess. 1 where the Apostle teaches that the faith and patience of the pious is proved through many persecutions and tribulations, as they have lived worthy of the kingdom of God for which they have also suffered. For although the sufferings of this time are not wholly deserving of the future glory which will be revealed in us as we cited from the same apostle above, because, of course, a momentary and light affliction does not have an equal proportion to the eternal weight of glory, still those who consistently endure adversities for the name of Christ, and against one’s own enticing concupiscence obeys the motions of the divine Spirit, [these] are worthy of the kingdom of God and a crown of glory, because it is appropriate for God to give those who genuinely [legitimate] fight to keep his commands those rewards which harmonize with his goodness and bountifulness. And to those who

pursue virtue out of love for him and for his glory, those rewards will be lavishly granted which are valued not with respect to the smallness of the work offered on their own, but [those rewards] will answer to the majesty and magnitude of the rewarder.

18. The most celebrated men, John Davenant and Moses Amyraut, provide evidence that Reformed doctors acknowledge that there is consent and agreement of this nature [cf. the previous thesis] between eternal life and the good works of the pious. Davenant, in explaining how the good works of the regenerate relate to eternal life, and are ordained to it, not only observes that those good works are ordained to be rewarded, because God gratuitously, according to his will of good pleasure, promises the rewards in this life and the future one for the good works of believing and regenerate men; but he moreover affirms that those good works have a certain ordination, or at least an aptitude, in their being ordained to divine rewards for, as it were, a threefold reason. 1. On account of the condition of the doer. 2. On account of the condition of the works themselves. 3. On account of the difficulty of doing good works. First, I will note what he says regarding the condition of the doer. “For,” he says, “when the doer himself is assumed to be a believer and justified, it is also presumed that he is admitted into the divine favor and friendship. But the law of friendship requires that whatever may be the services which an inferior performs for a friend in a higher station, they are compensated not according to the unimportance of the service performed, but according to the generous disposition and rank of him to whom they are offered. Therefore, seeing that the regenerate are numbered among the friends of God, according

to the saying of Christ, ‘you are my friends if you do whatever I command you’ (John 15:14); when they aim at this from a godly disposition, they may expect from God, their benefactor and friend, rewards of such a character as those with which he is accustomed to honor his friends.” Then, on account of the condition of the works themselves: “For these works which are called good, ought always to flow from the love of God, and have respect to the honor of God. But such a work, although it has not a condignity, yet there is a propriety in their destination (so to speak) for a celestial reward. For to do anything from the love of God calls forth the love of God towards the doer, which, since it consists in the effect, not in the disposition, brings with it of necessity the bestowment of some good. So to make our works have a reference to the honor of God, excites him as it were to honor us, and confer upon us the Divine rewards. Thus, the sacred Scriptures teach: ‘Them that honor me, I will honor’ (1 Sam. 2:30). ‘Whoever will give you a cup of water, in my name, because you are Christ’s, will not lose his reward’ (Mark 9:41)—As if he had said that no work is so small, but that if it be done out of love for me, and to my honor, it will obtain the richest reward for its doer.” Finally, he says that the very difficulty of doing good works, which arises from the opposition of the devil and the world, the resistance of the flesh, and the urge to do the contrary, gives to good works a certain fittingness for divine reward. “For,” he says, “some reward is always due to the one who strives lawfully in obedience to the direction of the umpire [i.e., he who assigned prizes in the ancient Greek games]. Therefore, since good works are not wrought without opposition and struggles—for the flesh lusts against the spirit (to say nothing concerning the devil and the world, who proclaim, as it were, war against all good works)—there is, on account of the difficulty of practicing them, a certain

ordination for rewards. He, therefore, who will have toiled and fought in the gym of good works, may say with the Apostle, 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord will give me,' etc. (2 Tim. 4:7-8)."

19. Similarly, the celebrated man M. Amyraut, in his little French book about the merit of works against Theoph. Brachetius Milleterius (pg. 50), accurately expounds and follows up with more explanation of the agreement between good works and eternal life. In giving a reason why God is said to the just according to their works, observes that the preposition *κατα*, that is, according to, in general signifies each relation or agreement which is between two things. But between the good works of the just and eternal life one finds quite clear and distinct agreements. For, first, good works are a moral good, and life and glory is a physical good, as they say. The former consists in virtue; the latter in praise and happiness. And so these two agree in that they are both goods, although not of the same kind. Second, good works restore the image of God as it is good and holy, and life and glory do the same as they are blessed and happy. And so these two agree in that, among both, in their own unique way, the image of God is made manifest. Third, seeing that holiness and good works share some excellency of the divine nature, God thus delights in them. So, on the contrary, God hates sin because they are opposed to the purity of his nature. Fourth, from this it follows that God has promised blessedness for good works and holiness, just as, on the opposite side, he has threatened penalty and punishment for sin.

20. And afterwards, on pg. 60 and following, Amyraut, while explaining how the faithful who are zealous for good works are worthy of the kingdom of God, teaches first they are declared worthy of the heavenly kingdom by reason of the holiness which is in them—not indeed absolutely, if God were to strictly examine them; but nevertheless, comparatively, with respect to the ungodly who are immersed in the filth of sin. Then he notes that there are two kinds of worthiness in things: One which consists in a certain relation of justice. In which sense, a worker is said to be worthy of his payment; The other which consists only in a certain harmony of nature, as when it is said, “produce fruit worthy of repentance,” that is, which are consistent with and in harmony with it. And it is in this latter sense that he affirms that the godly are worthy of glory and felicity seeing that happiness and the natural state of sin are incompatible, and are not able to be correspond; so there is a certain natural agreement between happiness and holiness, which true penitence promotes. And moreover, given an established promise of remuneration was made for the good works of the pious, they are worthy of remuneration because they are in the state which the promise requires, and they have that disposition which it demands.

21. Again, although there is a certain harmony among the good works of the faithful and the life and glory which God rewards to them which is the reason that Scripture speaks of the faithful as being worthy of eternal life, nevertheless in no way ought one to think that eternal life is owed *per se* and by strict justice because of their good works. For in order that, according to the rigor of the law, a reward to be owed to a work and labor, a simple harmony between a work and a reward is not enough. But it is required that the work be, as far as

possible, equal in worth and value with the reward, and we have already shown from Scripture that there is not that sort of proportion of equality between both.